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AUTHOR	Presson, Alice; Bottoms, Gene
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ABSTRACT

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and the Center on Education and Training for Employment (CETE) at Ohio State University worked with six schools (two comprehensive high schools, two high schools served by an area vocational center, an area vocational center, and a junior high school) in the SREB region to keep potential dropouts in school and help improve their academic achievement. Technical assistance and staff development services were provided to the schools for 3 years. Phone calls, site visits, and interviews were used to collect annual data on the numbers of dropouts, student characteristics, and the manner in which the schools implemented 23 general strategies addressing 9 key practices. School-, community-, and home-centered barriers to dropout prevention were identified. The key practices in helping prevent students from dropping out of school were as follows: identifying, targeting, and monitoring potential dropouts early in their high school careers; using an interdisciplinary team of vocational, nonvocational, and support personnel to plan and monitor curriculum and provide extra instructional support to targeted students; providing targeted potential dropouts with extra personal attention and extra instructional support; and involving business, the community, and parents in retaining students in school.(MN)

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A REASON TO STAY IN SCHOOL:

What Educators Can Do To Reduce Dropout Rates

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Southern Regional Education Board

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A REASON TO STAY IN SCHOOL:

What Educators Can Do To Reduce Dropout Rates

By Alice Presson and Gene Bottoms

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SREB

Southern Regional Education Board

THE DROPOUT PROBLEM IS OFTEN INVISIBLE

- **Teachers in a school participating in a U.S. Department of Education Dropout Demonstration Project admitted that they had not realized the extent of their school's dropout problem until they began to collect data for the project.**
- **One superintendent stunned his high school faculty when he reported that 27 percent of their ninth-grade students dropped out over a four-year period.**

A hundred years ago a person could succeed in the United States without a high school diploma. Today's youth who leave school without a high school diploma will have to overcome daunting odds to survive. Consider the following:

- The unemployment rate for dropouts is more than twice the rate for high school graduates who do not enroll in college (Ramirez and Robledo, 1989).
- In 1989, 78 percent of high school graduates were employed, compared to 61 percent of people who did not have a high school diploma (*Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1991*).

Seventeen percent of the nation's high school students who were sophomores in 1980 did not graduate (*Barro and Kolstend, 1987*). In the SREB region the percentage was higher—nearly 20 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 1988). Between 1975 and 1991, the proportion of 16- to 24-year-olds in the U.S. who drop out of high school declined by only one percent.

Federal and state government leaders acknowledge that the high school dropout rate is a serious problem which must be remedied; yet the problem remains invisible at the school building level. High school dropouts do not leave all at once; they trickle out—like water from a leaky faucet—and sometimes, in the case of difficult students, to the relief of educators. When schools count their dropouts, they begin to realize that the problem is severe.

High schools can reduce dropout rates if they make it a priority, if they work to improve the quality of school experiences for potential dropouts, and if they are persistent in their effort over time. The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and the Center on Education and Training for Employment (CETE) at The Ohio State University worked with six schools in the SREB region* for three years to keep potential dropouts in school and to help improve their academic achievement. This report describes what we learned about effective dropout prevention practices. It also discusses the implications of findings for local school district policies.

* The SREB states are: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

SREB'S APPROACH

In 1988, SREB and CETE identified key practices of successful middle and high school dropout prevention programs from across the country and developed a plan to implement them at six demonstration sites. Nine key practices focus on creating a learning environment for potential dropouts to encourage them to master the essential content in mathematics, science, and communications needed for graduating from high school.

SREB's six demonstration sites. SREB selected sites that were typical of many schools in the region. Two were comprehensive high schools; two were high schools served by an area vocational center; one was an area vocational center; and another was a junior high school. Four schools had fewer than 800 students; two schools had between 1,000 and 2,000 students. Two schools were located in rural areas; one was on the outskirts of a large city; three drew from a small

The key dropout prevention practices are:

- Identify potential dropouts early in their high school career, and target them with special assistance.
- Establish higher expectations in basic competencies for potential dropouts.
- Enroll targeted potential dropouts in challenging academic and technical classes designed to prepare them for employment and postsecondary education.
- Use applied instructional strategies related to real life to teach basic competencies.
- Help targeted students expand views of their potential to succeed in career and educational opportunities.
- Use an interdisciplinary team of vocational, non-vocational, and support personnel to plan and monitor curriculum and to provide extra instructional support to targeted students.
- Implement, as needed, a program of personal attention and extra instructional support to targeted students.
- Involve business and community leaders in retaining targeted students in school and in advancing their basic competencies.
- Involve parents in encouraging their children to remain in school and improve their basic competencies.

city population. All six sites were in economically depressed areas in which the per pupil expenditure was more than $1,000 below the 1988-89 national average of $4,927. Minority enrollment was higher than the national average at five of the six sites. One school was nearly all white; one school was nearly all black.

How did SREB and CETE work with these schools? SREB and CETE provided technical assistance and staff development to the schools throughout the three years of the project. CETE helped each school develop a system for keeping track of its effort to reduce the dropout rate.

What information did SREB collect? SREB and CETE collected information annually on the number of dropouts, their socioeconomic and academic characteristics, and the changes made by administrators, counselors, and teachers to encourage potential dropouts to complete school. A representative of SREB or CETE contacted each site by phone monthly and visited each site at least twice a year to collect information and provide technical assistance. To collect data on how the schools carried out 23 general strategies addressing the nine key practices, SREB and CETE interviewed administrators, teachers, counselors, and targeted potential dropouts at each school; teachers also completed a survey. Representatives observed classes with large numbers of potential dropouts to determine the extent of classroom intervention.

BARRIERS TO DROPOUT PREVENTION

After working with six sites in six states for three years, SREB learned that local barriers often impede progress in dropout prevention, and that some schools are more successful than others in overcoming these barriers. Most of the obstacles fall into three areas—school-centered barriers; home-centered barriers; and community-centered barriers.

School-Centered Barriers – School-centered barriers are related to leadership, curriculum, and instructional practices. The barriers include:

- Treating dropout prevention as a temporary project and changing leadership from one year to the next.
- Lack of administrative continuity in supporting dropout prevention efforts.
- Staff development that does not address specific steps which teachers and counselors must take to help solve the problem.
- Poor articulation between middle school and high school, and between multiple high schools within a district.
- School policies that hamper a student's progress—for example, not providing a reasonable way to make up an assignment after an absence.

- Continuing to channel students into a general track, giving legitimacy to the belief that some students can do nothing and are going nowhere.
- Providing no alternative to low level academic classes that do not actively engage students in the thinking and learning process.
- Conveying an aloof, uncaring attitude toward students.

Community-Centered Barriers – At least half of SREB's dropout sites were located in communities where many employers offered low-pay low-skill jobs and hired people without a high school diploma. Too often these jobs offer little training as a pathway to a better job. "Going to work" was a major reason cited by nearly 20 percent of the students who dropped out of the six sites in 1988-89 and 1989-90. Although sometimes the student's family needed the money for survival, frequently the student wanted the money to buy or maintain a car. Students' working hours often overlapped with school hours and included evening hours that deprive students of study time and rest needed for school the next day.

Home-Centered Barriers – Family situations are difficult for many children. Bureau of the Census data point out growing problems that plague many families in America:

- The proportion of American children living below the poverty level increased from 15 percent in 1970 to 20 percent in 1990.
- Drug and alcohol abuse is up 70-fold since 1960.
- Teenage pregnancy is up 109 percent for white females and 10 percent for non-white females since 1960.
- Female heads-of-households have increased from 12 percent to 23 percent since 1970.
- Teenage homicide has increased by 200 percent for whites; 16 percent for non-whites since 1950.
- Teenage suicide is up 150 percent since 1950.
- Arrests of teenagers charged with crimes doubled between 1960 and 1980 and continue to increase.

These problems are not unique to school districts in large urban areas. Dealing with dysfunctional families certainly represents a formidable barrier to all local educators who are trying to help potential dropouts complete school. Allowing parents to disassociate from the educational process conveys the notion that parental apathy or lack of participation is acceptable. Parents do not always know how to solve problems or how to support the educational efforts of their children. Some SREB sites developed creative ways to get parents' attention and support by working with them to solve problems. The schools provided parents with instruction on how to help their children, gave them "special treatment" by bringing them to school for reasons that did not anger or embarrass them, and worked with employers to create a work environment that supports employees' communica-

tion with schools regarding their children's academic progress.

To succeed in dropout prevention, school leaders need to overcome silent barriers in the home, in the community, and, yes, in the school building itself. Educators must be willing to replace traditional beliefs and practices with the conviction that potential dropouts are capable of completing school, and that they can make a difference with potential dropouts during the six-hour school day. This requires local educators to analyze the problems that inhibit high school completion, regardless of whether the problems originate at home, in the community, or at school. Through understanding, educators can tailor prescriptive strategies to address the dropout problem.

STRATEGIES THAT WORK

SREB found the following practices successful in helping prevent students from dropping out of high school and junior high school. The strategies worked best when the school system and local school leaders demonstrated strong and visible support of dropout prevention efforts.

1. Identify, target, and monitor potential dropouts early in their high school careers, and keep score on progress of the effort. Before teachers and counselors can help potential dropouts, they must know who they are. Schools in the SREB project used an identification process that included grades, standardized test scores, and the results of a questionnaire administered to all students. Those schools that made greatest progress in reducing their dropout rate began organizing in July and on the first day of school administered the questionnaire to help select students for targeted assistance. The school's dropout prevention leaders watched the academic progress, attendance, and personal problems of all students throughout the year to identify other students who might need targeted help.

> *"One key to the success of our dropout prevention effort was that we identified potential dropouts and targeted them with special assistance before each school year began."*
>
> – A principal in SREB's Dropout Prevention Initiative

> *"Early identification is critical in targeting aid to potential dropouts. In the first year of our prevention effort, we did not finish identifying potential dropouts until late in the semester. That was too late to keep some students from dropping out. We should start to identify potential dropouts in the spring semester prior to the next academic year. It is very important to give 'at-risk' students a good footing the first day they walk into a school."*
>
> – A principal in SREB's Dropout Prevention Program

At the most successful sites someone was designated to keep track of the progress of targeted students and to collect and report information on them—academic progress, absenteeism, and whether they dropped out. This information enabled schools to look at the various activities they used to help potential dropouts, decide

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which ones worked and which did not, and make needed modifications.

2. Establish higher basic competency expectations for targeted potential dropouts. Schools that were most effective in keeping students focused on raising their expectations. These schools found that improving the self-esteem of potential dropouts involves expecting them to do school work. Schools must do for at-risk students what they routinely do for students in college preparatory courses. Potential dropouts must believe that the school cares about them and that they are worthy of the school's efforts to help them succeed.

A second and critical aspect of raising expectations involves conveying the notion that there is an important connection between effort and achievement. Targeted students who showed the greatest gains in achievement in mathematics had teachers who clearly conveyed that they expected students to do meaningful work at school and at home. These teachers reviewed the work, provided extra help when necessary, and demonstrated a caring attitude toward the students. They successfully engaged students in the learning process. Students understood clearly that those teachers were focusing on the students' future and overwhelmingly praised teachers for caring and for making them work hard.

> *"I give homework each night based on what I present in class. I make sure the homework involves solving problems that students encounter in real life. I always review the homework and return it so that students can learn from their mistakes. My students know that they cannot get away without doing their work, but they know how to get help when they don't understand something."*
>
> – A successful math teacher of potential dropouts

> *"I think Mrs. B. is the meanest, most caring woman I know. She expects us to work hard and to do all of our work. She gets on my nerves, but she is right, and I understand why. She wants us to have a good education so we can have a good life."*
>
> – A potential dropout

3. Enroll targeted potential dropouts in a planned program of vocational and academic study. Many students who drop out of school fail to see the connection between school and their future. It is important for potential dropouts to have someone who helps them develop long-term goals for the future by developing and reviewing a planned four-year program of study. Vocational counselors played the leading role at SREB schools that made the most progress in enrolling potential dropouts in a strong program combining vocational and academic study. At one school, where the dropout rate fell from five to three percent, a full-time vocational counselor worked with targeted students and their parents to develop such a four-year plan. All of the randomly interviewed targeted potential dropouts at this school reported being enrolled in a program leading to a career, further study, or both.

Many schools have not developed challenging four-year programs of study that give all students the ability to succeed in further learning either on the job or in a postsecondary setting. Developing four-year programs for each student requires the cooperation of academic and vocational

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teachers, counselors, and administrators to make curricular and instructional changes. Most of all, school leaders must commit to end the general track; to replace it with higher level courses in math, science, and English; and to provide extra help for students in mastering the challenging content.

4. Use applied instructional strategies to teach basic competencies. SREB schools making the most progress with potential dropouts developed courses for teaching math and science in an applied way, provided training for teachers to instruct those courses, and enrolled potential dropouts in the courses. Five of the six sites offered Applied Math and Principles of Technology (Applied Physics). Observations of these classes showed that students were actively engaged in learning; the teacher was the facilitator and provided assistance when students asked questions; each student was responsible for performing an essential task in the problem-solving process; the problems were related to real life; and students worked cooperatively to solve them.

> ***"I've been a troublemaker at this school most of the time and have been a terrible student in math—even failing it once or twice. It's not that I didn't understand the math—I was just bored and usually tuned out. I'm a senior and am in this Applied Math I class now. I wish I had taken it earlier. I love this class because we learn things that we can use at home. Even though I'm graduating in a couple of months and I don't really like the teacher, I'd like to come back and take Applied Math II."***
>
> **– A potential dropout**

At SREB's six sites in the dropout prevention initiative, only one school made a concerted effort to enroll potential dropouts in applied courses. Students cannot be engaged in or turned on to learning through applied techniques if they are not in classes where teachers use those techniques.

5. Expand targeted students' personal views of their career and education potential and opportunities. Schools in the SREB project used a variety of techniques to help potential dropouts identify their career interests and learn how to meet career goals. One school involved teachers, counselors, administrators, students, parents, and representatives of business and industry in an annual Career Fair to talk about the necessary educational preparation for jobs in many fields.

The school that made the most progress in decreasing its dropout rate established a business and faculty mentoring program to expose potential dropouts to people working successfully in career fields. The leaders of that school worked closely with the local school/business council to select mentors from fields that interested the targeted students.

One school invited representatives from business and industry to participate in staff development on the changing workplace. The training focused on new requirements that high school graduates will have to meet. The school also arranged for some teachers to spend the summer working as interns in local companies to get a better feel for what they need to do to prepare their students.

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Most of the SREB schools arranged special field trips for their targeted students to see first-hand the type of education and personal skills they need to acquire for success. Some schools surveyed the career interests of potential dropouts and worked with the local school/business council to arrange field trips and guest speakers to give a practical view on the importance of a high school diploma.

6. Use an interdisciplinary team of vocational, non-vocational, and support personnel to plan and monitor curriculum and provide extra instructional support to targeted students. The most successful school in the SREB project developed an effective interdisciplinary team to focus on all aspects of dropout prevention. Called the Student Assistance Team, this group of teachers, counselors, and administrators met regularly to formulate strategies. A dropout prevention case manager kept track of attendance and academic progress, contacted appropriate teachers when a targeted student was having problems, and coordinated needed interventions. Another team member would meet with the student to discuss the problems and ways to overcome them. Typical interventions might be special tutoring, counseling for attendance or family problems, or even arranging for special help, such as a home visit by a social worker or school psychologist.

Another school developed an equally effective interdisciplinary team, but organized it differently. The site created a modified "school-within-a-school," called the Bridge Team, to work with 20 students at greatest risk in the eighth and ninth grades, plus four or five honors students from the same grades. The team consisted of four regular teachers—in English, math, science, and health/physical education—and several special teachers to provide extra help. They worked together in a four-hour block to provide instruction in the content area, and to help students develop skills in teamwork, social interaction, organization, problem-solving, decision-making, assuming responsibility, and goal-setting. The Bridge Team offered a friendly environment, geared to learning, for students who had not found success in the traditional school environment.

The principal's participation in this practice is critical. The principal must make sure that teachers on the team have common planning time to discuss problems and solutions. Another key to the team's success is frequent meetings—weekly or more often when necessary.

7. Implement a program of personal attention and extra instructional support to targeted students. If potential dropouts—particularly those having academic problems—are to succeed, schools must assure them that someone cares about what happens to them. Schools must be prepared to provide extra academic help. One school included a daily 25-minute period for all students to receive teacher-guided assistance. During that period, each teacher worked with 15 student "advisees" who may need tutoring or help in solving personal problems. Another school compensated teachers for staying after school to tutor students who needed extra help and personal attention. A third school developed a corps of peer tutors who were paid to work with potential dropouts several times a week. Other schools used special cards with free entry to sporting events, theatrical

productions, and similar events to compensate peer tutors.

8. Involve business and community leaders in retaining students in school and advancing the basic competencies of targeted students. Far too many students drop out of high school simply to work and many local employers are more than willing to hire dropouts who will work for minimum wage. SREB schools that had the greatest success in involving the community convinced business leaders that local companies and the community as a whole would benefit if a larger proportion of local students received their high school diplomas each year.

The school most successful in reducing its dropout rate developed a strong rapport with the local business council and met with it several times a semester. The business council joined with the school to establish a program in which professionals from business, industry, and a nearby state college served as mentors for potential dropouts. Some mentors invited the targeted students to observe or "shadow" them on the job to help students understand appropriate worksite behavior and habits for success. Mentors also visited classes to talk about the connection between school and work.

Another school developed an agreement with a local business that had been hiring potential dropouts. The school counselor discovered that some students worked until 10, 11, or 12 o'clock at night, despite academic difficulties. "Many of these kids also had major problems with tardiness and absenteeism," she said. The business continued to hire potential dropouts, but agreed that the students would not be allowed to work more than a limited number of hours a week, as approved by the school, or beyond a certain hour at night. The business promised to give students higher wages after they had worked successfully for a period of time. Students had to agree to maintain a certain grade point average, not to work if their grades suffered, and not to go to work if they had been absent from school.

9. Involve parents in retaining students in school and advancing the basic competencies of targeted students. Research on dropouts indicates that many come from impoverished families in which the parents themselves had dropped out of school or from single parent families. Most educators agree that getting parents of such students involved in the education of their children presents a challenge. The school that had the most success with parents designed several activities to encourage parental involvement. The school's administrators required parents to come to the school to retrieve the report cards directly from a teacher and set aside three evenings during the week after the grading period for this purpose. At the first grading period, only half of the parents came that week; most remaining parents came during school hours of the second week. At the end of the next grading period, more than 90 percent of the parents came for the reports during the first week.

Another school worked through the local school/business council to develop ways to encourage employees to promote the school success of their children. The school held workshops at the business sites on how parents can encourage their children to remain in school. Some businesses agreed to give their employees leave time to meet

with school personnel periodically or at the request of the school. The dropout prevention coordinator at that school said, "We are now working with the Chamber of Commerce to endorse these practices and to encourage all businesses and industries to initiate them."

Monitoring attendance closely and contacting parents helped improve school attendance. The schools in the project contacted parents each time the targeted students missed school or were tardy. Most parents appreciated hearing about tardiness or absences they had not condoned.

MAJOR FINDINGS FROM SREB'S DROPOUT PREVENTION EFFORT

SREB found that participating schools having the greatest decline in their dropout rates had several similarities in how they approached the problem. Likewise, the schools with less change in their dropout rates shared various characteristics.

Sites with Notable Change

School sites that reduced the dropout rate kept score on how they were doing. They improved the quality of their curriculum and instruction. Parents of potential dropouts and community and business leaders became actively involved in supporting and encouraging those students to succeed in school. School leaders made dropout prevention a priority and sustained the focus on the initiative during the three-year effort. More specifically, SREB and CETE found that in the three sites with the greatest decline in the dropout rate:

- Teachers devoted more time each week to developing assignments for potential dropouts.
- Teachers developed more special help materials to assist potential dropouts in math, science, and reading.
- Teachers spent more time before and at the beginning of the school year to meet and to plan interventions for potential dropouts.
- A staff person kept track of the academic progress and attendance of potential dropouts.
- Teachers reported spending between one and two hours a week working with potential dropouts to help them master content in math, science, and reading.
- Staff development focused on improving students' basic skills, applied instructional techniques, learning styles, and understanding the needs and problems of potential dropouts.
- More school staff were involved in dropout prevention.
- The school administrators actively participated in the dropout prevention effort.
- The schools successfully used an interdisciplinary team to focus on

curriculum and extra help for potential dropouts.

- The schools received support and active help from community businesses for the dropout prevention initiative.
- The schools had more success in getting parents involved in their children's education and viewed parental involvement as an attainable goal.

Sites with Little Change

Schools showing the least progress made little effort to improve the quality of the learning experiences; the primary focus was on attendance and remediation. There was lack of continuity in leadership and little effort to encourage a core group of faculty to concentrate on the initiative. In particular, SREB and CETE found that in these sites:

- The amount of time that teachers and counselors worked with potential dropouts decreased dramatically after the first year of the effort.
- The schools did not use a team to monitor curriculum and academic needs of potential dropouts.
- No one kept track of the academic progress of potential dropouts.
- School staff spent more time working on attendance problems than on academic needs of potential dropouts.
- The school principals were not visibly involved in the dropout prevention effort.
- Personnel changes occurred in the school or district administration and in dropout prevention from one year to the next.
- The schools did not expect nor were they successful in involving parents of potential dropouts in the education of their children.
- For a long time, most teachers in the schools were not aware of the dropout initiative.
- Many teachers expressed their belief that the home environment, rather than school environment, was the main factor prompting students to drop out.
- Administrators, teachers, and counselors did not know if their efforts were making a difference—no one kept track of whether the dropout rate was changing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Reducing dropout rates occurs when superintendents and principals are personally involved in doing something about the problem and sustain their involvement over time. School completion rates will improve as teachers engage potential dropouts in learning content that students see as challenging and meaningful. This includes giving those students the extra help necessary to master difficult content. School leaders must support teachers and counselors by providing time to plan curricular and instructional changes and by providing staff development to help them make the necessary changes. Teachers and counselors, however, must know who the potential dropouts are and what their individual problems are in order to help them.

Parents, the community, and local businesses need to realize that they are part of the problem. School leaders must show parents of dropouts and community and business leaders how to encourage potential dropouts to succeed in school. Everyone benefits from such efforts.

School leaders and faculties must determine what works and what does not work in their dropout prevention efforts. To do this, they need to keep track of their dropout rate, school completion rate, and academic progress and school attendance of potential dropouts. They also need to know what special assistance they have provided potential dropouts. Only by understanding the outcome of their efforts can they fine-tune what they are doing.

There is no "quick fix" for reducing the dropout rate. It is a multi-faceted problem that has its roots in our rapidly changing society and in our assembly-line system of education that fails to encourage teams of educators working together to improve school practices for students most at risk. We must realize that schools and the community share the problem and both must work together on the solution. Schools need to take advantage of the time potential dropouts spend at school to change their patterns of defeat and help them see the connections between school and their future.

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